

The Many Faces of the Freelance Performer of Contemporary Music in the 21st Century

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1. Introduction

Performing contemporary music requires a particular set of skills. Understanding new forms of notation, boundary-pushing virtuosity, new instrumental techniques, and the conceptual challenges of articulating complex sonic architecture are among the many challenges that the performer of new music must master. There are other skills and challenges facing the new music performer, however, away from scores and instruments, that are as vital to a performing career as musical expertise.

Recent generations of musicians working in contemporary music are increasingly self-managing their work rather than relying on agents or management teams. These musicians now need to learn the skills of agents and managers as well as those of marketers, PR agents, lawyers, fundraisers, project managers, social media managers, and compositional coaches. The increasing use of digital technology in both their performances and their marketing also demands that new skills be acquired, from a wide knowledge of computing and audio-visual hardware to skills in programming, photography, and video editing. These many faces of the contemporary music performer are largely unseen by audiences, yet they are vital not just to their careers but to the entire contemporary music ecosystem. One might call these “entrepreneurial” skills, but this term connotes an approach that is driven by growth and profit. As a result of the current challenging arts funding environment, many music companies and institutions have adopted neoliberal ideologies of market power and economic growth. Although these practices can be used to support artistic innovation, they should not be mistaken for goals in and of themselves (Ritchey 2019). For individuals focusing on contemporary music, this disjunct between means and ends is even clearer. The priority is rarely the maximisation of profit—it is primarily the creation and performance of new music, with many musicians (including myself) supplementing their performance income with other work despite having a busy performing schedule. I will, therefore, simply call the skills I discuss in this chapter “non-musical skills”: unrelated to the craft of music yet necessary for a career as a musician.

The set of skills and approaches I discuss in this chapter are required of musicians working across solo as well as chamber music. There are significant continuities between the working modes, conditions, constraints, and opportunities

experienced by soloists and chamber musicians, with the research findings being relevant for both kinds of practice. The main difference between these modes of working is that in chamber groups, the skills and related responsibilities can be distributed among the members, and coordination between members in undertaking these tasks can be as important to the survival of these ensembles as their compatibility as musicians. Some solo/chamber musicians apply these non-musical skills to a range of repertoire and styles, but as with musical skills, there are also non-musical skills that are specific to contemporary music, requiring a degree of specialisation. As (primarily) a specialist in the performance of contemporary music, I will cover both specialised and general non-musical skills to show the full range required by freelancers.

Although my focus is UK-based musicians and their careers within the UK's new music scene, many of the skills and conclusions can be applied much more widely, not just to other countries but to musicians across many specialties, genres, and styles. This chapter has two main parts. One is a case study of one of my own touring projects, examining the many skills and costs required during the two years of commissioning and performing. The second is a survey of mid-career freelancing contemporary music performers that sheds further light on the range of skills developed and utilised by 21st-century musicians, their approach to self-training in these skills, the time and financial pressures of self-managed work, and some of the troubling discriminatory issues that they face as freelancers.

2. The 21st-Century Music "Industry"

Most musicians and researchers would agree that there is no single music industry, but many different intersecting cultural industries (Williamson and Cloonan 2007; Dromey and Haferkorn 2018). Contemporary classical music is a relatively small and idiosyncratic part of this larger cultural ecology but shares many main features with other larger sectors, and it is subject to the same economic conditions. Although the current generation of freelance musicians faces many new challenges, the economic environment is not so different from the industry of the past. Since the late 18th century, performers have faced similar challenges of self-representation, self-promotion, and tour logistics as well as the economic pressures of live concerts (McGuinness 2003). However, it is also clear that the internet has transformed what it means to be a musician, alongside broader funding and economic changes that have demanded new skills and knowledge (Rogers 2013). Although I touch on this transformation of the industry in this chapter and discuss the views of musicians in my survey, my aim is to provide a snapshot of the skills and economic conditions of the contemporary music performer today, whether these are skills that have been required for centuries or skills that have only emerged in the post-internet age.

There have been a few insightful research projects touching on the specific skills required to be a freelance musician in the internet age. Wilson and Stokes (2002) identify many of the business skills that are required of musicians, stating that their research has demonstrated

the need to reconcile the virtues of “independence” with such qualities as appropriate partnership and promotion strategies, effective communication skills and financial self-sufficiency in order to optimise exchange conditions for cultural entrepreneurship. Such a reconciliation demands an unusual ability to combine understanding and experience of financial and management affairs with specialist music knowledge and skills. (Wilson and Stokes 2002, p. 51)

Susan Coulson’s (2012) interviews with classical musicians in Northeast England offer further insights. She calls them “accidental entrepreneurs”, with few of them considering themselves to be running a business and most rejecting the label of “entrepreneurial”. Nevertheless, they were likely to self-identify “business-like” behaviours and skills such as organising their projects and maintaining their networks and to emphasise co-operation and community as their priorities (Coulson 2012, p. 251). Coulson identifies a danger in discussing musicians’ work in terms of economic impact and, as previously mentioned, I agree that these skills should be measured as tools for artistic aims rather than in terms of entrepreneurial success. Indeed, Coulson’s findings chime with my own experience of the current generation of contemporary music performers, who value collaboration and a sense of community over competition.

In another chapter in this volume, Davidson and Krause discuss the demands of a portfolio career on chamber musicians in Australia. Their case study on the GM Quartet shows how the quartet’s inclusion in a prestigious series, “enables them to brand the quartet as a distinctive entity when promoting themselves as individuals or members of other ensembles in other forums such as broadcasting and recordings”, but these benefits must be weighed against the time commitment required of all of the members and the other opportunities and responsibilities within their diverse portfolios. For them, “the ensemble is not a route to financial stability; rather, each member enjoys the diversification and many different and varied forms of performance”.

Gross and Musgrave (2020) have highlighted the psychological pressures faced by self-managed musicians. They discuss the many roles and “logistical and organisational skills and knowledge” required of musicians across a range of genres:

Many of those we spoke to had a wide variety of roles within their musical work. For instance, some of the roles we heard about alongside music making and music performance involved artist management, starting

their own record labels, teaching music ... applying to third-party agencies, consulting, having a radio show ... running choirs or producing for theatres. (Gross and Musgrave 2020, p. 43)

Significantly, they found that “becoming your own brand and presenting what you have to offer in the digital sphere has become a full-time occupation” (ibid.). For emerging artists, it is vital to “catch the attention of a live agent” and, even for established professionals signed to a label, “online work for many is part of a daily routine” (ibid.). On the question of whether the current generation of musicians faces new challenges, Gross and Musgrave argue that the current digital environment “exaggerates existing conditions while producing new ones”, which can result in a disconnect between perceived success and financial security. As one of their interviewees explained:

Because of the way the music industry works, it’s all sort of sold to people. It’s smoke and mirrors. ... From the way you have to promote yourself on social media, some people think I’m a millionaire! [But] I live in my Mum’s loft. (Interviewee quoted in Gross and Musgrave 2020, p. 51)

Kirsten Thomson (2013) concurs that the internet age has created unique opportunities and challenges for musicians, stating that “technology has ushered in this era of artist as a free agent, both in control of his or her creative output and able to leverage value on the open market” but also documenting the large number of income sources musicians need to juggle in order to sustain a viable career (Thomson 2013, p. 523). The specific skills and economic environment of contemporary music have been much less researched, with the majority of these studies examining the conditions for composers through academic surveys (Smith and Thwaites 2019; Farrell and Notareschi 2021) and surveys by peak bodies (Sound and Music 2015; Bleicher 2016). With performers forming a vital component of contemporary music’s creative ecology, examining their skills and challenges in more detail is vital to ensuring the ongoing sustainability of the whole new music sector.

3. Case Study: Applying the Freelancer Skillset in Tours 2018–2019

In order to examine the skills required of a self-managed performer, I will begin by discussing my own experiences. I am primarily a soloist, specialising in new works combining the piano with new technologies, and have collaborated with many of the world’s leading composers, performing 120 world premieres. I have also had a parallel career as a chamber musician, however, performing as a core member of Ensemble Offspring and the Marsyas Trio, and in many guest performances with other UK and Australian ensembles. In 2018 and 2019, I toured a series of programmes featuring newly commissioned works, all using different

combinations of piano and multimedia. The majority of these programmes featured Alexander Schubert's (2018) internet culture-focused work *WIKI-PIANO.NET*. These programmes were performed in different combinations in 27 performances, featuring at major festivals and series across the UK, Denmark, Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands, and Australia. As sensitive details will be discussed, I have anonymised the composers as well as the presenters when discussing specific negotiations, budgets, and correspondences. I have divided the skillsets into several major categories. Although there are various overlaps, there are also clear distinctions between skills in business and management, legal expertise, marketing and PR, managing budgets, and managing the audio/visual technical requirements of contemporary music.

3.1. Management and Self-Representation

Although management agencies are still taking on emerging musicians as clients, in my experience, this is rare for freelancers working in contemporary music. Indeed, of all the musicians interviewed as part of this research, only one had representation in Europe. For self-managed freelancing musicians, many of the tasks and roles that might have been taken on by agents and managers must be filled by the musicians themselves. And even for those with management, freelancing musicians still need to understand these skills and share many of the responsibilities with their managers.

3.1.1. Networking

Networking is vital for freelancers who are attempting to build relationships with powerful curators and directors. Although networking has become a fundamental part of the industry, it is a skill that musicians are rarely trained in and that many introverted musicians (myself included) find difficult. Locations for networking vary widely. I have had the opportunity to meet curators at concerts on many occasions. These are often random meetings, however, and can be difficult for those without any mutual contacts. In many cases, luck plays a large role in gaining the ear of the right curator.

During the 2018–2019 tour, I also attended events whose primary aim was to create networking opportunities. The most prominent of these was Classical NEXT, held annually in Europe—those I attended were in Rotterdam (The Netherlands) and Hannover (Germany). Classical NEXT attracts festival directors, publishers, and curators from a wide variety of countries (including most of Europe, a number of countries in South America and Asia, and large contingents from Canada and Australia). Although I found this musical marketplace initially daunting, I have had increasing success over the course of three attendances at this event by developing better strategies for building networks and pitching proposals. I was then selected

for a showcase performance in the 2022 iteration, facilitating even greater access and visibility to curators and directors.

Although networking opportunities are theoretically open to all, networking is a practice that can advantage those from privileged, “insider” backgrounds and disadvantage many structurally disadvantaged groups, that is, groups whose disadvantage is embedded within the structure and practices of organisations and institutions. This includes women, members of ethnic minorities, trans and non-binary people, and people who are disabled or neurodiverse (see further discussion below). Another negative side effect of networking is the exacerbation of alcohol overconsumption. Melissa Dobson (2010) has examined the role of alcohol as a career facilitator in socio-professional contexts, particularly after concerts, and argued that the availability of alcohol as well as its cultural acceptance among musicians can lead to a much higher average intake of alcohol, exacerbating addiction and other mental health problems (Dobson 2010, p. 249).

3.1.2. Pitching

Pitching a programme involves contacting a curator and sending a proposal in the form of a programme list and short description. Some curators respond well to themes or other “hooks”, and many respond well to proposals utilising professional visual design and photographs. I utilised both of these strategies during this touring period, but I find it difficult to ascertain how much they contributed to a proposal’s success. Even for a very successful tour, pitching has a low success rate, making it very time- and labour-intensive. I sent out 111 proposals to festivals and curators from 2017 onwards, which resulted in 27 performances of solo piano and multimedia repertoire in 2018 and 2019—a 24% success rate. Only four of these resulted from “cold calls”, where I had no prior contact with the curator or connection via a featured composer—an overall success rate of 7% when considering the cold calls alone. Even for existing relationships, many follow-ups were often required (in one case up to seven times) to get a response. Although I had complete control over the choice of programmes and presentation to the curators, the extra time and labour of designing, contacting, and following up required many additional hours each week—a significant addition to any musician’s schedule.

3.1.3. Negotiation

The final stage of discussions with a presenter is the negotiation of a fee and conditions. In these situations, a representative is far better placed to argue the value of a musician than they are themselves, given an individual’s lack of points of comparison for fees and the impossibility of objectively judging one’s own value. My own negotiations often featured at least one stage of requesting a better fee or conditions, but the power imbalance when negotiating with large organisations

meant that substantial changes were rare. In the past, I accepted performances for no fee, and emerging performers will often accept these terms in return for the opportunity to perform at a major venue or festival.

3.1.4. Project Management

Planning and presenting a contemporary music concert, even with the support of the presenting organisation or festival, require project management skills. For newly commissioned works, I needed to manage the fundraising and contract writing as well as the negotiations with the composers. In the lead-up to an event, a photographer, designer, PR agent, and programming assistant were often required. In addition, presenters often have many staff requiring different types of information to first negotiate the event and then prepare for it. In one extreme case, the email exchanges with venue staff included:

- A total of 24 emails to pitch and discuss the project, negotiate terms and discuss initial technology and marketing requests;
- A total of 5 emails to discuss programme notes;
- A total of 20 emails to discuss marketing;
- A total of 27 emails to discuss the details of the technology requests.

On the day of a concert, up to 16 staff need management—in one case, I was managing an electronics assistant, a venue manager, two venue AV staff, two lighting staff, a photographer, a piano tuner, a film crew of three, the barman/catering for the interval, the front-of-house staff and two ushers, and my PR agent (who was still organising media engagements on the day of the concert). Managing all of these staff while simultaneously setting up and rehearsing for a concert is a challenging skill that few musicians receive any training in. The logistics of touring also require significant time and organisation, booking travel and accommodation, and planning travel between airports, hotels, and venues with large amounts of equipment. Planning these logistics while also keeping to very tight budgets requires months of preparation.

3.1.5. Legal Expertise

When drafting and negotiating contracts, as well as other music business decisions, I needed a wide range of knowledge of many areas of law. Touring requires knowledge of international tax treaties, visas, and work permits. Drafting contracts for composers requires an understanding of standard contract clauses and language. Negotiations with presenters require an even wider and deeper knowledge of many areas of law. Many musicians have little training or knowledge in these areas, leaving them open to inadvertently agreeing to non-standard or even exploitative contracts. For example, liability and insurance clauses can seem

particularly opaque to the inexperienced. In one case, negotiating the clauses around public liability insurance and liability transference required me to undertake a close reading of that country's insurance law, which saved me hundreds of pounds in costs. Rights over recordings can also have many confusing components. In one contract, I surrendered the commercial rights over the live recording of the concert but negotiated restrictions over the specific ways it could be featured and exploited by the presenter. Many early career musicians lack the experience to successfully negotiate changes to these clauses, putting them at a disadvantage compared to musicians with professional representation.

3.2. Marketing and PR

Although many presenters have their own marketing plans, the majority require artists to implement their own plans to be able to draw an audience while under pressure and ensure a commercial success. The pressure is even greater for arrangements where the musician is receiving a door-split for their fee or taking on the financial risk of hiring the venue.

3.2.1. Print Marketing

My marketing for concerts in the tour involved a combination of physical media and online platforms. Some presenters produced physical media such as season flyers themselves, but additional concert-specific flyers were mostly left to the artists. However, with the cost of design, photography printing, and distribution factored in, the cost-benefit ratio does not always make this an efficient marketing tool. I produced flyers for only five of the 27 concerts in this tour (with design/printing/distribution for four of these totalling GBP 1100), although I also distributed series flyers produced by several venues. As with all of these skills, self-designing marketing materials can reduce these costs, but this also comes with the cost of the musician's time and labour as well as the prior costs of specialist software and self-training in graphic design.

3.2.2. Online Marketing

During this tour, I relied much more heavily on online marketing. I have a moderately strong (by contemporary music standards) social media following of 5200 followers across Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter: moderately high in comparison to many new music soloists and chamber groups, but certainly not the highest, and minute in comparison to major classical organisations such as orchestras or in comparison to musicians in popular music genres, who all consequently wield substantial marketing power compared to contemporary music performers.

My strategy for social media marketing focused on a constant stream of new content across different platforms, often balancing the personal and the professional.

Creating this content and curating four different social media sites (including edited videos for YouTube) with multiple posts per week in the lead-up to a major concert were very time-consuming but have resulted in an average doubling of my audience numbers compared to previous tours. Alongside this distribution of content, documenting events for future marketing requires significant investment, including photography as well as recording and filming concerts. This is very difficult, if not impossible, to do well without outsourcing these tasks to professionals with the right skills and equipment, although such outsourcing often totals over GBP 1000, sometimes resulting in all profits from a concert being applied to cover documentation costs alone. Potential audience members can also be reached more directly through the use of email lists: I have relatively small lists numbering close to 500 people in total, although the difficulty of enlisting new members to the lists and increasing the use of email filters make this a limited tool in comparison to social media, although still valuable for communicating with audience members who are less active on social media.

3.2.3. Public Relations

Public relations (PR) is also a crucial component of any marketing campaign, with the exposure of a feature article or review being worth thousands of pounds in marketing value. As part of this, a press release needs to be written, designed, and sent to dozens of press contacts two-to-three months in advance. Although many of the contact details for arts editors and TV/radio producers are now available online, a PR consultant has the advantage of established relationships with journalists to draw upon. Again, the time–cost benefit needs to be weighed. With the aid of funding, I hired PR consultants for eight performances of this tour at a significant cost (GBP 550–1500 per concert).

3.3. *Fundraising and Budgeting*

Besides the skills involved in undertaking a tour, there are many major costs involved. Fundraising involves a combination of application to grants from both public funding (such as through the Arts Council England) and non-government foundations and trusts (such as through the PRS Foundation and the RVW Trust), crowdfunding through platforms such as Kickstarter, and approaching private donors, all of which I undertook to fund this period of commissioning and touring. Grant applications can take weeks or months of work, with many requiring more than 20 pages detailing the planned project, its performances, its impact on the community, and the budget and budget justification. My crowdfunding campaigns relied on a persistent month-long campaign of emails and social media posts, offering rewards such as free tickets to concerts, listing in programmes, and an invitation to an afternoon party that I hosted for the donors to meet the composers. Enlisting

donors took the consistent cultivation of these relationships over five-to-ten years and inviting potential donors to concerts in hopes of them being interested in supporting a project when called upon.

Even with significant success in the fundraising for these projects, the costs for any event are high. To demonstrate this, I present the budget for a particular section of the two-year tour in Table 1. Three works were premiered, and the programme was then toured to three other venues for a total of four performances. Both public and private funding supported the project. As it can be seen, despite the funding and fees, I was left with only GBP 775 as profit for a project that required at least three months of intensive preparation for four performances (over three more months), with the majority of my fees being used to balance the budget. A lower-paid European performance that did not cover airfares was included in the tour as part of my long-term career goals in that country as well as some slightly better-paid performances in UK venues, including a festival, a pub-based series, and a university. The costs involved were relatively modest compared to other events, where flights, flyers, and (for self-presented events) the hiring of the venue and staff added thousands of pounds to the expenses.

The profits could be increased through less investment in the marketing/PR and documentation of the event, but I consider these as long-term investments towards future performances, so I weighed these costs against the opportunity cost of removing them from the budget. This type of investment is only an option for performers with a separate source of income—in my case, my academic position. Another possible solution would be applying for a larger grant, but this can be difficult when most public grants and trusts have tight limits for individuals as opposed to organisations or would be unlikely to award a larger grant for a relatively small-scale project. Some schemes are only available for commissioning funds or favour funding for commissioning over performance costs. In addition, most funders will not offer grants to projects requiring them to cover more than 75% of the costs, with some explicitly stating this as a condition (PRS Foundation 2021). Most importantly, many funding schemes do not account for the full extent of the administrative time required by performers to manage the project, including the application for the grant itself.

Given both the scarcity of funding, and the huge demand for it by performers, it should be clear why most solo/chamber performers of contemporary music require alternative sources of income. It also demonstrates the importance of publicly available funding schemes—without these, many contemporary music projects would simply be unviable.

Table 1. Budget for a series of four concerts, 2018–2019.

Expenses	
Commission fees for three composers	GBP 11,500
Specialist equipment for one of the works	GBP 500
Filming/editing for the film part of one of the works	GBP 1000
Filming and editing of the concert video recording	GBP 800
Fee for an electronics assistant	GBP 250
International airfares	GBP 300
UK intercity train fares (including for the assistant at the premiere)	GBP 275
Other travel within cities (including bus/Uber)	GBP 70
Accommodation, including for the assistant at the premiere	GBP 380
Online advertising	GBP 100
PR consultant	GBP 1500
Photographer	GBP 100
Additional equipment for performance	GBP 250
Additional cables/adapters required	GBP 180
Software required for two of the works	GBP 450
In-kind use of already-owned performance equipment (computer, interface, keyboard, cables, and software)	GBP 5200
Total Expenses	GBP 22,855
Income	
Funding grants (from public funding and trusts)	GBP 9000
Private funding from an individual donor to commission one of the composers	GBP 4000
Performance fees	GBP 2500
Travel and accommodation (when covered by the presenters)	GBP 430
In-kind provision of already-owned equipment provided by the performer (computer, interface, keyboard, cables, and software)	GBP 5200
Total Income	GBP 21,130
Profit/Loss	
Net Project Profit/Loss (without the performer's contribution)	–GBP 1725
Net Profit/Loss to the Performer (after contributions to the project)	GBP 775

Source: Table by author.

3.4. Technical Skills and Organisation

This tour featured works combining the piano with live technologies, which are the core of my current commissioning/performance projects. The use of electronics and video is a common feature of recent contemporary music, and most soloists and chamber musicians need at least a basic familiarity with the technology to communicate their requirements to venues. Unlike many of the other skills discussed, the skills around the use of audio-visual digital technologies are specific to contemporary music and are only occasionally required by solo/chamber musicians performing historical repertoire.

3.4.1. Knowledge of Equipment and Software

My touring programmes required investment in equipment—cables, adapters, and a sound interface to allow for ease of touring. Although most venues have the required cables and connectors, the precise inventory of each venue would always differ, and it became vital to have my own adapters and cables to supplement the venue's equipment. Building this set of equipment has required ongoing research and investment over the past decade.

The programmes also required a working knowledge of a number of digital audio workspaces (DAWs) and other software. These included: Max for complex live processing (using patches built by composers), Ableton for other live processing and samples, Logic as an alternative for samples (required by some composers), QLab for the syncing of video with click tracks and other elements and the web-based score performance application for *WIKI-PIANO.NET*, with some works requiring several of these to be used simultaneously. Being able to manage the electronics/video parts was not enough; I also needed to prepare and design all of the transitions to make them as seamless and swift as possible, which required many hours of planning and rehearsal. It should be noted that although my programmes utilised a lot of technology, I only required up to a five-speaker sound distribution—many solo/chamber electro-acoustic performers need to manage many more speakers and far more complex electronics parts.

3.4.2. Communication of Technical Requirements

Communication with the venues about the required equipment was also crucial for concert preparation. Detailed discussions regarding the connectivity options for projectors, the locations of power points, available microphones, lighting, and details of the specific PA (public address) system were required for each concert. Communication about the musical needs of each piece further included the number of audio inputs, the location of foldback, and the balance between the electronics and live parts. A typical email is shown below, where I explain the need for a mixer to switch the video source between two different laptops (out of three laptops that were required for this performance):

For the video mixer—I think we should only need one. If you can mute the screen between pieces then that works fine, but do note that for some works the HDMI signal will come from my laptop and for others from Ben's at the desk, so there needs to be an elegant enough way to switch between these.

For the keyboard, I can bring mine (49 keys) but if a larger one can be found, that would be ideal. Just needs to be MIDI, not weighted or sound producing.

Can I just check that the mixing desk will take at least 9 inputs? And both XLR and jacks?

For lighting, I'll need just one spot above the keyboard, or one on each side (to cancel out shadows).

I have attached a stage plan for your reference. (Kanga 2019)

The stage plan mentioned in the email (Figure 1) is a vital tool for communicating these many technical requirements.

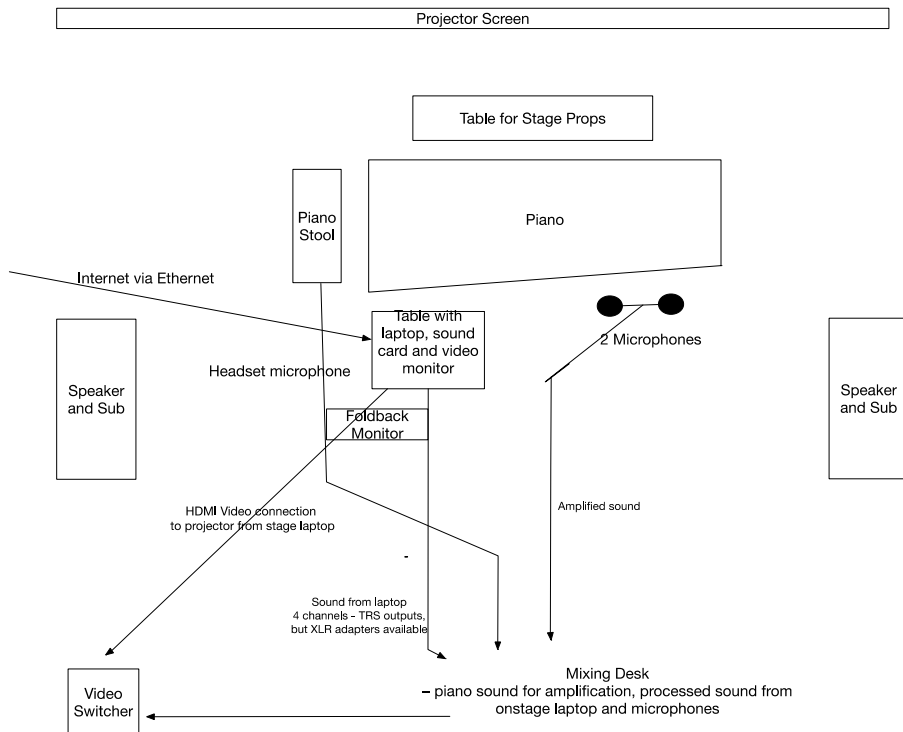


Figure 1. Stage plan created by the author for a Cambridge Music Festival performance, 13 November 2019. Source: Figure by author.

3.4.3. The Costs of Performing with Technology

There are significant time and financial costs to these technical requirements. The setup and soundcheck on the day require an additional four–six hours to a normal setup and an extra hour for packdown. Substantial time is required to communicate with the venues as well as preparing the electronics, including transitions, requiring many hours of additional rehearsal time. Each new software platform requires self-training over many weeks or even months, and the total costs of even basic cables and adapters add up quickly. In some cases, a recital will be so complex that

an assistant is required and paid out of one's own performance fee, as was the case in the budget shown above. All of these requirements create significant barriers to the 21st-century musician in engaging in new music that integrates new technologies.

3.5. The Freelancer's Time

All of these tasks took much more time than the time spent on the music. In the weeks leading up to some of the bigger events with multiple premieres, I was spending 24 hours of practice a week on the programme while spending around 36 hours a week on all of the other non-musical tasks. In smaller chamber groups, this additional administrative burden can be shared by the members, requiring collaborative planning, the sharing of contacts, and the distribution of tasks alongside the musical tasks of learning and rehearsing repertoire. In larger ensembles, distributing these tasks among all of the members becomes inefficient, and a small team around an artistic director usually takes on these responsibilities. In most cases, across this spectrum of solo and chamber music, the additional administrative workload is unpaid or only partially covered by funding. As we will see in the following section, many freelance musicians share my experience and observations about the skills and workload demands of the industry.

4. Survey of UK-Based Contemporary Music Performers

In order to place my own experiences within a larger context, a survey was undertaken in March–April 2019 of freelance solo/chamber musicians, all working in contemporary music in the UK. The survey was sent to a small number of selected performer colleagues by email as well as being posted on Twitter to elicit a wider range of responses, with this tweet receiving 10,128 impressions. Only responses from participants with established careers and a significant track record of featuring contemporary music as solo/chamber performers in the UK were accepted. Although some emerging and international performers also replied, their responses have not been included in this discussion. A total of 14 musicians were selected as eligible, all of whom are mid-career (age 28–48) UK-based contemporary music performers, performing across a number of instruments (piano, flute, clarinet, cello, guitar, percussion, voice). All have established careers and perform regularly at major festivals and venues around the UK, and all of them are self-managed. The survey covered the non-musical skills they use as part of their working lives as well as the challenges they have faced as freelancers. It consisted of a series of open questions to elicit free responses, with some participants writing extended multi-paragraph answers to each question. Follow-up questions followed in several cases via email interviews. All of the participants gave their consent to be included in the research, and all have been anonymised to protect their privacy. The main survey questions are provided in Appendix A.

4.1. Management and Business Skills

Many of the respondents focused on general administrative, organisational, and negotiating skills. Participant 1 (P1) stated:

Mostly it's organisational skills—keeping track of deadlines, organising to-do lists (especially between [ensemble members] and I, so that the administrative work is divided evenly), maintaining contacts with venues, organising riders for concerts with electronics, negotiating fees (learning when to say “no, thank you” if a fee is just too low), etc. Filling out tax returns also big—have learned this process in four different countries now. My ensemble [is] also a registered business, which means a different tax process. (P1)

P2 also included the organisation of rehearsals and the writing of contracts as well as a number of marketing and staff management tasks associated with self-presented concerts, where there is an even greater pressure to sell tickets compared to concerts presented by a venue/festival:

Applying for opportunities, proposing ideas, applying for funding, marketing, general promotion, accounting, budgeting, proof reading, designing posters, writing programme notes, liaising with venues/promoters/composers, booking musicians, writing contracts, getting insurance, selling tickets, organising front of house staff, booking venues, planning rehearsals, getting PRS clearance ... the list is endless! (P2)

P3 mentioned many of the same core skills, which can be well summarised by their self-assessment as being “my own CEO and employee at the same time”.

The skills that I consistently tap into are:

- producing (including running the budget, fund-raising, ensuring logistics run smoothly)
- marketing (although PR sometimes outsourced to publicist)
- pitching concerts (including writing proposals)
- networking (not necessarily with any agenda, but always interesting to meet people and learn)
- negotiating (including fees and conditions)
- initiating collaboration (with interesting artists)
- basically being my own CEO and employee at the same time—with strategising, self-producing records, running social media for direct-to-fan engagement
- being my own coach—to ensure that I am physically, mentally and emotionally sound to continue delivering the work described above. This is so important (especially considering the competitive nature of our industry), and sometimes easy to be overlooked. (P3)

Among the skills listed, organising, keeping deadlines, social media marketing, pitching, communication with venues and presenters, and negotiation were the most common. More specialist skills such as writing (grant applications and programme notes), design work (using Photoshop and InDesign), technical preparation, and tax returns across several countries were also listed by some respondents. The majority of respondents mentioned that this work takes up a large amount, if not the majority, of their working time. P4 stated that “there are days you have to give over entirely to admin and accounting and forget practicing”.

4.2. Skills in Audio-Visual Technologies

Close to half of those surveyed had developed technical skills that allowed them to run their own electronics on stage, while a few said they had an assistant or another member of the ensemble to manage electronics. Only two respondents said that they do not work with electronics at all. P3 discussed the range of hardware and software that they use on stage:

Yes. I have self-taught myself to use Logic ProX, ProTools, Ableton Live, midi controllers, loop pedals etc., in addition to learning how to wire all my gear... by watching YouTube. (P3)

P1 also mentioned the importance of communicating with venue staff, which chimes with my own experiences as mentioned above:

Through time, I also learnt how to efficiently and effectively communicate with FOH sound and lighting technicians etc., and streamline my tech rider. (P1)

Although some respondents thought this was a new skill that musicians of the past had less necessity to learn, P5 put this in perspective as a gradual evolution over several decades:

Perhaps there has been a change from previous generations in skills required as “classical pianist”. I think laptops, electronics etc. have been used widely in the generation before already, but perhaps not as commonly amongst pianists who were classically trained. (P5)

4.3. Changing Economic Conditions for the Freelancer

Several respondents discussed the changing economic conditions for freelance musicians. P6 mentioned that the old model of hiring a manager or PR consultant was now much harder to justify:

I think musicians are having to be increasingly resourceful and self-sufficient. I don’t think the economic conditions are there any more

to be able to routinely hire a team of people (even a manager and a PR), especially early in your career. (P6)

P7 went even further, stating that with the availability of contact information on the internet, the portfolio of contacts that an agent/manager could bring is now less valuable:

Yes, I would attribute the cause to the prominence of the internet. Agents and managers used to be crucial because of the databases they held. Now that all that information is available online, these contacts are less valuable. (P7)

However, several other respondents thought that the freelance performers of the past faced similar issues to today and that the main changes are the speed of communication and the need to manage social media marketing. P4 wrote:

The advent of computer technology across all platforms has changed everything and not entirely for the better as there's always a need to respond to things quickly as we can't make an excuse of "it's in the post" anymore! (P4)

P2 put a positive spin on freelancing despite its difficulties, including the ability to make a significant impact on contemporary music:

I think this more portfolio-based approach can create some amazing opportunities, including to define what music is in our own time, and to create approaches to it that are different from the previous generation, but there is a lot of competition for the traditional opportunities and that path is increasingly difficult to follow. (P2)

Clearly, there is a range of perspectives of the effect of the internet on freelancing, but the consensus is that the greater access and opportunities it provides modern freelancers outweigh the additional workload of online marketing and emails.

4.4. Training of Freelancers

The majority of the respondents agreed that almost no training in these management skills was provided to them by teachers or by their educational institutions, despite a number of them having completed postgraduate study. P1 recalled:

None of my teachers had the skills or knowledge to prepare me for this kind of "portfolio" career. The expectation was definitely to get a job, probably in an orchestra. But I think having a varied approach and doing a lot of different things is actually one of the more exciting things about being a musician. (P1)

P8 concurred that these skills were developed out of necessity for any musician who is not signed to management at an early age:

I think that unless the artist is signed by a major agency/label/management at a young age, the skills mentioned above are those developed by a musician naturally as we progress with age and build our portfolio. (P8)

For some, such as P2, organised self-study was required to develop the skills to manage several businesses as part of their work:

No formal training but I have always thought of my work as a business and studied, through books, etc., various different aspects of business skills. I find that side of it both a bit annoying—I'd rather be playing music—and sometimes intellectually stimulating. I currently run a few different businesses and am involved in a couple of charities too. These things are an essential part of being a musician and I think being good at them gives a great amount of freedom within a musical career. (P2)

All of these mid-career respondents relied on self-training in the skills required, and as we will see, it remains to be seen whether more formal training options for current student musicians can cover all of these diverse skills and knowledge.

5. Discussion

Having examined the many skills and strategies required by solo/chamber musicians performing 21st-century music, a number of common challenges can be identified.

5.1. Discrimination and the Barriers to Diversity

One major issue raised by the pressures of modern freelancing is that it creates an environment where discrimination against women, ethnic minorities, trans musicians, and neurodiverse musicians can flourish. As Christina Scharff has found (2020), the procurement of work primarily through networking “tends to disadvantage women, as well as working-class and black and minority ethnic workers” (Scharff 2020, p. 17). Networking also favours the extrovert, and artists who are relatively neurodivergent can be seen as not just eccentric, but difficult. This is complicated by changes in perceptions of eccentric behaviour based on gender and race. A large survey of 1000 participants carried out at the University of British Columbia found that white male scientists are seen as being more trustworthy and credible, with behaviour that is perceived as arrogant or narcissistic among women and scientists from ethnic minorities being perceived as charismatic among white scientists (Zhu et al. 2016). Similar studies of freelancing musicians have shown that women are much more likely to avoid self-promotion than men and that they are

more likely to consider these activities immodest or unartistic (Scharff 2015, p. 97). As previously mentioned, there has been a great deal of research and discussion around the lack of diversity of composers in the industry (Smith and Thwaites 2019; Farrell and Notareschi 2021; Sound and Music 2015; Bleicher 2016), but there are very little data available about contemporary music performers. Nevertheless, the data that exist for composers can provide us with some insights into the industry. In the UK, 6% of newly commissioned orchestral works and 21% of all new commissions are by women (Bleicher 2016, p. 6). When it comes to race, the diversity problem is even more pronounced: only 6% of newly commissioned works across the UK are from ethnic minorities (Roberts 2016). The reasons for this diversity problem are not simply a matter of racism and misogyny, although these *are* issues in the industry. Lauren Redhead has written about the tacit criteria for applications that perpetuate unintended discrimination (Redhead 2019). For example, because fewer women are accepted onto young artist schemes to write for orchestras, fewer women have orchestral examples to use to apply for further opportunities, even if those are blind selected.

Although these surveys provide valuable insights into the contemporary music industry, contemporary music performers are not included in any of these studies and are also not treated as a distinct category within Musicians' Union surveys that cover all genres of music (van der Maas et al. 2012). The result is that contemporary music performers remain under-studied, falling into the gaps between these different industry studies. This means that discrimination among new music performers cannot yet be acknowledged or tracked, although these performers face similar discrimination problems to composers. Several of the survey respondents shared stories of shocking misogyny and racism: one female respondent had a performance cancelled after informing the presenter she was pregnant, while another mentioned that the venue staff would only speak with the male members of the ensemble, repeatedly ignoring her questions. I have also experienced this type of discrimination by venue staff as the only non-white member of an ensemble.

There have been some admirable strategies for tackling diversity issues among composers such as the PRS Foundation's Keychange scheme, aiming for 50:50 programming across the UK in the next three years, and the Darmstadt Summer Course's application system introduced in 2018, which has separate application portals with equal limits for male and female/non-binary composers. However, as there are almost no data on performers in the industry, there are no similar strategies for addressing imbalances among contemporary music performers. While blind auditions have had an impact on increasing the number of women and ethnic minorities in American orchestras over recent decades, these processes are not available to freelancers, who rely on face-to-face networking (Goldin and Rouse 2000).

5.2. Funding and the Cost of Modern Performance

All of these non-musical skills that I have discussed above require years of “training through experience” as well as the time spent preparing for each project. The amount of time (50–70%) that I typically spend on these tasks is mirrored by the survey results among other musicians. Outsourcing of some of these tasks is possible, but this comes with additional costs, and the factoring of all of these costs into funding grant proposals renders these applications unviable and unlikely to be awarded.

Another factor is that many funding schemes for contemporary music are primarily aimed towards commission fees for composers, with a more limited number of funding streams being available for performance costs as part of commissioning projects. Emerging contemporary music performers in particular can struggle to secure funding and performance opportunities, while there are many schemes by major funding bodies and institutions that are specifically aimed at emerging composers. As noted above, new music performers are excluded from surveys and also have minimal inclusion in reviews, academic studies of contemporary music, and contemporary music awards, shrinking their voices in this musical ecosystem. The scarcity of funding means that freelancing new music performers without alternative sources of income (including working as session musicians, orchestral jobs, teaching and academia, work in other fields or spousal/family support) are very rare, and the dearth of working-class performers is even more pronounced in contemporary music than it is in the already middle–upper class-dominated classical music industry (Bull 2019). Even modest changes to funding priorities could have a positive impact on these issues of diversity and precarity. Although all musicians face similar challenges—the Musicians’ Union “The Working Musician” report found that 56% of UK musicians earn less than GBP 20,000 per year (van der Maas et al. 2012)—precarity and fee levels among new music solo/chamber performers affect the whole contemporary music community, with a particular knock-on effect on composers. Clearly, the long-term sustainability of contemporary music can only be ensured through a greater prioritisation of funding towards the development of early career new music performers.

5.3. Lack of Formal Training in Non-Musical Skills

Given the huge importance of the management, marketing, and business skills discussed, it is significant that neither I nor any of the respondents received formal training in these skills during our music education. However, there are signs of change for the current generation of students, with a number of undergraduate modules being introduced that address self-management skills. For example, the Royal Academy of Music offers “Artist Development” seminars, workshops, and individual tutorials for students, the Guildhall School of Music and

Drama has “Professional Development” elective modules that can be taken in each undergraduate year, and professional skills are increasingly integrated into university performance courses. This type of integration has been my own approach as an early career lecturer, including lectures on budgets, marketing, fundraising, and the pitching of programmes within solo performance modules as well as in my tutorial sessions, and I am also planning a module that is specifically focused on professional development that would allow these topics to be covered in greater depth and detail. The question remains as to whether these modules adequately prepare students for a freelancing career given the huge variety and depth of skills discussed above and the relatively low proportion of time students will spend studying them. Indeed, López-Íñiguez and Bennett’s (2020) recent research found that most music courses did not adequately prepare students for their careers, with the musicians who self-identified as “learners” having greater long-term success through the sustained career-long self-study of new skills (López-Íñiguez and Bennett 2020).

There is also an opposing perspective that adding these options to already crowded curricula means that students miss out on important core musical skills and knowledge. Furthermore, it could be argued that this type of vocational training erodes the central philosophy of universities, i.e., that education is valuable in and of itself. I would argue that the move towards acknowledging the importance of these non-musical skills is a positive development, but such courses will never fully replace the need for emerging musicians to self-study the particular skills they require for their own individual career pathways.

6. The Future of the Contemporary Music Performer

In discussing solutions to the challenges raised in this article, one could reasonably argue that changing the entire economic environment would have immeasurable benefits for both musicians and musical culture. Many of these non-musical skills are requirements of the current funding environment and musical marketplace, and a mechanism that could ensure a stable living wage for freelancing musicians would have benefits for performers, composers, and presenters. However, given that this is unlikely to occur in the UK, or, indeed, most other countries, in the short term, we can consider some steps that could not only make the lives of mid-career performers more viable but also encourage and support new young performers to embark on freelancing careers in contemporary music.

These recommendations apply to both solo performers who must manage all of these challenges themselves as well as to chamber musicians, who can distribute the challenges and skills among various players in administrative roles. However, as in my own case, many musicians straddle both of these categories and face many variations of these challenges across the many simultaneous strands of their career.

An easily achievable recommendation is for the regular collection of data on performers of contemporary music to complement the wealth of data collected on composers. Structural inequalities could then not only be identified but could also be addressed with targeted action, such as through the extension of initiatives such as Keychange to performers. Further UK-based opportunities for networking and pitching by performers alongside composers would not only assist emerging performers in becoming established in the scene but would also help to create greater programming diversity among UK presenters.

As previously mentioned, these skills are being introduced into tertiary education at universities and conservatories. Although I do not recommend these become a compulsory component of the tertiary syllabus, the widespread adoption of these courses and their honing to address the specific skills that are relevant for today's freelancers would provide a much-needed base level of knowledge for some of these fields. As with all good tertiary teaching, the aim should not be to provide all of the knowledge students require for freelancing but the tools for them to continue to learn, research, adapt, and develop throughout their careers.

Although I see major structural economic change to be unlikely, some modest changes to the economic environment could have major benefits for the performers of contemporary music. More funding should be available to performers of contemporary music, not just when they are premiering new works, but for training and the development of non-musical skills. Furthermore, particular funding priority should be given to emerging new music performers. Without them, emerging composers find that there are few (and dwindling) performance opportunities for their music.

Several of these recommendations are dependent on a fundamental change in the relationship between composers and performers. Performers currently shoulder a substantial proportion of the unseen and unpaid administrative workload for projects. They also receive less acknowledgement for their creative contributions to the work in mainstream media and academia and, by extension, by audiences. This is not to suggest that composers are not financially struggling as well, and there are many who contribute in major ways to these management tasks by presenting series, directing ensembles, or simply being proactive in the fundraising, technical preparation, marketing, and concert presentation of their music. However, making the sharing of these responsibilities, skills, and management tasks a mainstream expectation rather than a welcome exception would ultimately benefit both performers and composers.

Finally, greater collective organisation between performers could have significant benefits for the community. Sharing information about opportunities and presenters and sharing the skills and knowledge needed to self-manage a career as a performer would assist emerging and established performers alike, with a pooling of expertise and the ability to discuss topics such as fee levels, discrimination,

and funding as well as artistic knowledge about composers and existing repertoire. Such community discussion currently exists within small social communities of performers, but a more organised professional association would facilitate not just the sharing of skills and knowledge but representation through a united voice that could help to influence changes in industry practice, funding, and the acknowledgement of creative value, just as composers' associations have done for a century.

At the time of writing, the global COVID-19 pandemic has vastly reduced the activity of the UK's contemporary music scene. It may be idealistic to expect that positive or even paradigmatic change for the industry might be more achievable after this hiatus. However, if any of these recommendations could be implemented on the other side of this crisis, it could lead to a more sustainable, artistically vibrant, innovative, and diverse contemporary music culture.

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Appendix A. Survey Questions

The following survey questions were posed to contemporary music solo/chamber performers:

1. What proportion of your performance work is self-managed (i.e., pitching your own solo work, or your ensemble)?
2. What skills, other than your performance skills, do you regularly need to use as part of procuring, organising and delivering these performances? What tasks are required (e.g., pitching concerts, marketing, negotiating, etc.)?
3. Have you had any training in any of these non-musical skills, or have you just learnt from experience? Have you become especially skilled in particular tasks?
4. What proportion of your working time as a musician gets taken up by non-musical work such as administration, marketing and emails?
5. Is working with electronics/video part of your practice and what skills have you had to develop to set up and run these aspects of your performances?
6. Do you think there has been a change from previous generations in the skills that are required of solo musicians? If so, what do you think are the causes behind this change?
7. Have you ever experienced discrimination in the industry (sexism, racism or another type of discrimination)?

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